

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, November 21, 1896, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Beinn Bhreagh Hall. Sunday, November 21, 1896. Dear Mabel:

I like occasionally to dip into Emerson, although I cannot follow him very far — and last night had a most enjoyable time — all by myself — with his Essays on Experience and Character. I can't read him as a whole — but only by bits. I have found it impossible to follow his argument — if indeed he has any argument — because my attention is constantly distracted by the gems of expression that lie scattered around on every page.

Instead of making my extracts upon cards for my own use alone — I have copied some of them out for you — and enclose them with this. I do not know of any writer who gives more beautiful expression to his thoughts than Emerson — and yet I always rise from a perusal of his Essays with a sense of disappointment. There seems to be a lack of coherence — of continuity — in everything of his that I have read — of course the fault may be in me — and not in him — but I cannot get a general impression of the subject-matter from his writings — only a disconnected series of impressions.

I find myself admiring single sentences — and fragments of thought scattered here and there through his pages — but these do not build themselves up into a single picture. They lack coherence — and resemble — to my mind — rather a collection of building materials — than the completed edifice itself. His expressions take my fancy — but rarely 2 touch my mind. Take for example his definition of “Spiritual.”

“The physicians say they are not materialists; but they are: — Spirit is matter reduced to an extreme thinness; Oh! so thin! — But the definition of Spiritual should be, that which is its own evidence. ”

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To this definition he gives the emphasis of italics — but looked at with the cold eye of Reason — there is nothing to it at all — at least it seems so to me.

I met with a great disappointment in the laboratory yesterday — and some of Emersons expressions have struck right home. “Man lives by pulses. The mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits.”

“There never was a right endeavor but it succeeded. Patience and patience, we shall win at the last.”

Your loving husband, Alec. Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell, 1331 Connecticut Avenue,
Washington, D. C.